

“The Space of the Masque, from Stage to Ridotto.” Paper presented at the *Society of Architectural Historians 2006 Annual Meeting*, Savannah, Georgia. (2006)

Though Habermas, in *the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, does not discuss the specific context of Venice, his critique of the emergence, transformation, and disintegration of the bourgeois public sphere is an appropriate analysis. It is clear that within the Venetian 18th c, the representation of power *before* the people was replaced by a sphere in which state authority was publicly monitored through informal and critical discourse *by* the people. The financial collapse of the ruling (patrician) class and the opening up of this ruling class to the merchant class (cittadini) is just one such marker of this transformation. So too are the various journals, pamphlets, and publications that spurred public debate and introduced foreign topics to the citizens of Venice. The architectural representation of this shift is seen in the creation, similar to conditions described by Habermas, of various institutions such as the *ridotto* (gaming hall), *casini* (salons), and the theatre. Though these institutions were indeed present, open discourse was still not guaranteed. Entry and participation was permitted only if the patron was wearing a mask. The regularisation and control of the patron’s attire through various sumptuary laws allowed for the representation of publicness to occur in a nuanced way. Concurrent, and I would argue essential, to the structural transformations described by Habermas, however, is the emergence of *the self* within the public sphere.

In this short paper, I would like to consider the *way of discourse* (participation?) within the public sphere of Venice vis-à-vis the emergence of the self within the reform of the theatre. I will discuss the transformations of the commedia dell’arte through the positions of two vociferously opposed playwrights – Carlo Goldoni and Carlo Gozzi – and the role of the masque within the representation of publicness within the eighteenth century. In essence, I contend that the transference of the mask itself, from the stage to the city, created a new kind of physical space in which discourse could occur and a nuanced conception of Habermas’ representation of publicness emerged.

Masques had been worn in Venice for many centuries. The city is often identified with the masque and, indeed, anyone spending time in Venice now sees the far-too-frequent vendors. The carnival season swelled in mid part of the eighteenth century to last almost six months, with a break only for Christmas. Added to this were various regular festivals and processions that occurred at least bi-monthly. These six months were balanced by the *villegiatura* – the annual summer migration of Venetians out of the swampy city to their palazzi on the mainland. During these festivals and in carnival season, Venetian nobles and visitors would don masks typically taken from the tradition of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition. The masks were so popular that those who made them were supported by a guild (*scuola*).

The three fundamental characteristics of the *commedia* were improvisation, the roles performed, and the masks worn by the players. Each role was recognizable by the clothing that the player wore, the objects carried and, of course, the player's mask. Pantalone, [image] a constant in the *commedia*, was known by his red tights and vest, dagger or handkerchief carried in his belt, a round black hat on his head, a dark brown mask with a hooked nose on his face, and a pointed beard or moustache. He was Venetian and often played serious roles with comic asides. Perhaps the best-known role was that of Harlequin, whose costume changed over time from a series of irregular patches to a more geometric pattern of triangles and diamonds. He excelled in agility and acrobatics and often played a bit of the fool, though just enough to always wiggle himself out of a bad situation. The nobles and foreigners wearing the masks would often take on the characteristic of the role.

By the mid eighteenth century, two types of masks could be seen with much more frequency than those taken from the *commedia* tradition [image from Longhi]. The *bauta*, which consisted of a tri-corn hat, white half-mask, and black cape (*tabarro*) and the *moretta*, a smaller, round mask that had no straps can be seen in the many paintings by Longhi, Bella, and others.

The *moretta* was secured to one's face by a small button on the reverse side of the mouth that the wearer held between the teeth and was often worn with a shawl (*nizioletto*). An interesting effect of this mask was that the wearer was unable to speak. Masks were typically worn during the day and night in public: to the theatres, the cafés, the gambling halls (*ridotti*), and salons (*casini*). In fact, sumptuary laws enacted throughout the mid-eighteenth century, *required* that a mask, first for women and then for men, be worn for entry into the theatres as well as the gambling halls. Only those who handled the house money did not wear a mask; they were forbidden to do so. Importantly, these masks, the bauta and moretta, were not based on a role from the commedia tradition. They seemed to be more of an amalgamation of attributes from a series of masks. Rather than offering clues to a character type, these masks had the effect of removing any signs of character.

Those who wore the masks were either of the patrician or merchant class. The sumptuary laws were put in place to dissuade the nobles from excessive displays of wealth and to protect them jealous attacks. At this time in the eighteenth century, the lines separating the classes had become blurred. The 3500 *nobili*, or patricians who could make a claim to one of the twelve original families in Venice held the various political positions within the Republic. Present, however, was also the *cittadini*, or merchant class, who over the years were able to profit from Venice's prime position within trade routes. By the end of the 17th century, and for the first time in over 400 years, families were able to buy their way into the patrician class. This would continue until the demise of the Republic in 1797. The monies were used to offset costly wars as well as to support those patricians who were no longer able to support themselves. These patricians were given housing near S Barnaba and as a result became known as *Barnabotti*. The result of this was the potential for families to effect governance as well as taxation as based on wealth and not divine right. It was also these classes of Venetians who filled the tables of faro at the gaming rooms and the boxes at the theatre.

If nothing else, the theatre was popular in Venice. The theatre season grew to overlap with the carnival season. Over the course of the eighteenth century, there were at least nine theatres operating in the city, and more than half of those had been constructed within the same century. This is an unprecedented growth of a building type, especially for a city that was supposedly in dire financial straits due to costly and repeated wars. It was at this time that the theatre was undergoing serious reform. The transformation of the *commedia dell'arte* tradition was played out through the in the clash between the two main characters debating theatre reform at this time, Carlo Gozzi (1720-1806) and Carlo Goldoni (1707-1793). Even as Goldoni and Gozzi were arguing with each other about the reform of the theatre, similar themes arise in their work: the emergence of character in opposition to the mask as role, the departure of the mask as the one who carries the plot, and the collapse of their personal identity onto the stage. Each of these had ramifications within the public sphere.

Goldoni did not exaggerate when he claimed that his life was taken from two books: the book of the world and the book of the theatre. The book of the world offered Goldoni a look into the natural character of man, including his habits, vices, and virtues. The book of the theatre contained ways of representing the passions of man so as to educate as well as delight with wonder and laughter. I would argue that, for Goldoni, these books were often written on the same pages. The Pasquali edition of Goldoni's collected works, *Delle commedie* (1761-1778), included a series of frontispieces that chronologically depicted Goldoni's own life from an early age.

[images from Pasquali edition]

In the preface he explained: "Each and every frontispiece [of the plays], as I have always said, represents a piece of my life, from the time I was eight years old, which was the time when my flair for the comic theatre began to develop. This was compounded by the fact that my childhood corresponded to the wonderful childhood of the Italian Comedic Tradition." Goldoni continued to state, "I had hoped to make a summary of my life in the frontispieces, which had already been dispersed in various letters, prefaces, and some scenes of my own previously printed

work.” Indeed, many plays by Goldoni were based upon autobiographical experience, including, at least, *The Venetian Lawyer* (*L'avvocato Veneziano*), *The Impostor* (*L'impostore*), and *The Honourable Adventurer* (*L'avventuriere onorato*).

Goldoni also looked to other characters around him as inspiration for his plays. For example, various actresses in the Company at the *Teatro S Angelo*, with which Goldoni worked, found their way into his productions. His 16-play season of 1750 included at least two that caricatured the situation of his actors: *The Hypochondriac* (*La Finta Ammalata*) was based on the ever-sick wife of the troupe leader, Teodora Medebach. Another, *The Fickle Woman* (*La Donna Volubile*), mocked one of the more capricious actresses in the company. *The Woman's Gossip* (*De'Pettegolezzi delle donne*) was based on an old Armenian man whom Goldoni had found in the *Piazza S Marco* and whose haggard appearance was the object of much teasing and gossip amongst unmarried Venetian women. The 17-volume edition of Goldoni's works concluded with the writer in Paris and the 1787 publication of his *Mémoires*. The subtitle—“to serve the history of his life and that of the Theatre”—confirms the collapse of his life and the life of the theatre.

Indeed, this collapse between the world and the theatre, and between Goldoni's life and his characters', is most clearly seen in *il Teatro Comico*, first performed in 1750. It is a critique of the *commedia* tradition as well as a proposal for a new type of theatre. The play itself is the rehearsal of a play. Actors perform characters who are playing roles from the *Commedia dell'Arte*. For example, the famous Venetian actor Antonio Mattiuzzi Collalto performed in the role of “Tonino” who plays “Pantalone” in the production. In addition, the characters represented various Venetian personalities. Goldoni, for instance, was represented by the character “Orazio,” described as an author who has written 16 plays in one year, as did Goldoni in 1750. He even takes the time to mock his critics as represented by a rather dumb playwright named “Lelio.” The plot lines of this and many others of Goldoni's plays were not drawn from the typical situations of the *commedia*, but rather from the life of Goldoni and those around him. He included the

traditional roles of the *commedia* in the performances, but these roles (Pantalone, etc) are now played by characters (Orazio, etc) and are performed by actors.

As Goldoni's career developed, he became more and more critical of the masks used within the performances of the *commedia* tradition. He felt that the mask showed only a general, and not specific, emotion. Espousing reasoning similar to that offered by Riccoboni from many years prior, Goldoni explained that a comedy without masks was more natural:

"The mask" he says "must always inhibit the actor in expressing both joy and grief. Whether the character is making love, is irate, or is simply jesting, he always has the same piece of leather on his face. However much the actor gesticulates and varies his tone of voice, he can never show, by means of those facial expressions which are the heart's interpreters, the diverse passion agitating his soul."

Goldoni was not without his critics. Carlo Gozzi was one of the most vociferous opponents of Goldoni's reform. Gozzi is often characterized as the defender of the *commedia* tradition against the reforms proposed by Goldoni. However, Gozzi's attack was not as much a defence of the *commedia* tradition as it was a personal attack on Goldoni. He mocked Goldoni's pretensions to purge the *commedia* in order to appease an innocent and naïve audience. Gozzi wondered, first if the audience was really that naïve, and then if wondered if it was even possible to purge the bawdiness from the theatre. He countered Goldoni's puritan attitude with the comment that no one has ever been able to completely purge the more prurient aspect of the *commedia*, even since, he claimed, the works of Menander. In essence, Goldoni's attempts were useless and further, that people seemed to enjoy the ribald entertainment.

In response to the characterisation of the dim-witted poet Lelio in the *Teatro Comico*, Gozzi mocked Goldoni in a scene of his own. One day during the carnival season, some members of the Academy of the Testicles (*Accademia dei Granelleschi*) were in *del Pellegrino*, a fictional bar that overlooked the *Piazza S Marco*. They saw a truly monstrous mask enter into the bar and, intrigued, asked it to come over to their table. The great mask had four faces and four mouths.

Gozzi named the monster as “The Comic Theatre of Goldoni.” Each side revealed each of the four faces of Goldoni’s supposed reform. Gozzi critiqued *il Teatro*’s smug and shallow morality. Though the mask tried valiantly to defend itself against the verbal assault, in the end the monster opened his pants to reveal yet another mouth, which, weeping indecently upon itself, begged for grace.

Clearly Gozzi was not above caustic satire and was surely less uptight than the more self-righteous Goldoni. The title of his autobiography—Useless Memoirs (*Memorie Inutile*)—was appropriate to his character. He seemed to be much more bitter than Goldoni, and much less intent on a moralised reform of the theatre. He introduced himself: “My name is Carlo and I was the sixth child to drop from my mother into the light, or should I say darkness, of this world.” Gozzi claimed that his *Memoire* were useless for two reasons: first, he deemed them unnecessary owing to his humility, and second, he believed that he had not really done or said anything in his life beyond that which had already been done and said in his printed works.

Gozzi also presented his own story within his works. Rather than taking plot lines and characters from the city, as Goldoni did, Gozzi remade a series of fairy tales (*fiabe*) for the theatre. These were drawn from established fairy tale collections. For example, his *Turandot*, which takes place in mythical Persia, was taken directly from *Arabian Nights* and later made famous in an opera by Puccini. The play included characters from the original tale such as the princess Turandot and the prince Calaf, but also roles from the *commedia*, such as Brighella and Pantalone. The play was a huge success, leading Gozzi to claim that the popularity of a play did not depend upon the “realism” or “morality” of Goldoni but rather on the fantastic. Though critical of Goldoni, it is important to note that in Gozzi’s work, as in many of Goldoni’s plays, masks and characters mix. Pantalone makes an appearance in *Turandot*, but not as a character within the play. Pantalone’s role, rather, is to comment on the performance directly to the audience. He adds a running commentary of critical and ironic lines, mocking the action. Though

part of the entertainment is the witty improvisation offered by the mask, it is no longer the only action to watch.

Gozzi and Goldoni differed greatly in their aims for reform of the theatre. Both however mixed the recognisable masks of the *commedia* tradition with new characters in their performances. Though the characters and plot lines for both playwrights differed, the *commedia* masks acted in an intermediate space between theatre and city. Both playwrights also wove autobiographical threads into their work. This was often masked by the use of characters. It was also within the performance of the theatre that debate regarding reform was carried out, again masked in the form of caricatures.

I argue that the emergent public sphere occurs but discourse was always masked. In the public sphere of the theatre, the *bauta* and *moretta* dissolved identity; gender, class, and race could be hidden. Whereas Pantalone, and all of his traits, was *recognisable* by virtue of his mask, so to speak, the *bauta* masked even the wearer's public costume. However, this parity did not always allow for, as Habermas has suggested, the "better argument to win" (p. 36). The effect was rather and more often to allow for transgressive acts to occur: loss of money at the gaming table, illicit affairs, and sexual acts. The *moretta*, as you will remember, was held in place by a button with the mouth. Surely this did little to encourage debate. It is not only the existence of the "public" spaces, as described by Habermas, which allows for the participation within the public sphere, but rather, it is the masks – either in leather or as caricature – that allow for this to occur.

The space of the public sphere, then, is that space between the mask and the face as well as the space between the self and the character that one portrays through characters on the stage. It is not solely within the institutions of the café, *ridotti*, or *casini*. It is the masque, which hides identity, that allows for such participation. It is exactly the personal identity that Goldoni and

Gozzi are portraying and characterising through their work that must be masked to allow for participation within the public sphere of Venice.

[image of zanetti's caricature self portrait, with mask]